



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
VA St. Louis Health Care System

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2017 – STL – 07



<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



St. Louis Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the high standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center – John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans reported positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persisted among veterans with the customer service they received at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a “secret shopper” program for veterans—formally named the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans' organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the seventh Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the St. Louis region facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2017

To the Director of the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my seventh Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the St. Louis Region. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the St. Louis region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the St. Louis VA's ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I mean it as much now as I did then. Today, I am pleased that a record number of veterans are telling me how the St. Louis VA has changed for the better in recent years—how attitudes have improved; how respect shown is greater; how cleanliness and scheduling efficiency have increased. These are performance markers to be proud of, but there is still more work to do. I hope that the installation of a permanent director provides the kind of stability and leadership necessary to maintain these positive trends. The report suggests veterans' experiences at the VA are generally improving across the board; however, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on these responses alone. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the continued focus that we have established over the last few years, not only on providing quality healthcare but stressing patient-centered care through customer service. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the St. Louis VA Medical Center recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support of my partners at the St. Louis VA Medical Center and several Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in St. Louis.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

Chris Holland
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Would you like your voice heard?

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the St. Louis region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about St. Louis VA Medical Centers and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as St. Louis VA or VA facilities) through the period ending April 9, 2017. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the St. Louis VA Medical Center to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the St. Louis VA Medical Center; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA and submitting other concerns identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Claire's office, veteran leaders and the St. Louis VA Medical Center worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA medical center regarding the quality of customer service.

Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the St. Louis region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 9, 2017. In the St. Louis region, four hundred six (406) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys collected from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, not including any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all survey responses were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations. Specific comments were selected to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement offered or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

Limitations

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys or from veterans' service organization representatives. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 9, 2017. During this period, four hundred six (406) survey responses were received in the St. Louis region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty percent (60.1%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	2.7%
Korean War	5.4%
Vietnam War	60.1%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	19.7%
Iraq/Afghanistan	13.3%
Other	15.0%

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	93.6%
Female	6.4%

In the survey, over fifty-five percent (55.7%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John Cochran VA Medical Center. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

St. Louis VA Medical Center - Jefferson Barracks Division	41.9%
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St. Louis VA Medical Center - John Cochran Division	55.7%
St. Charles Clinic	4.4%
St. Louis CBOC	1.0%
Washington, MO CBOC	2.5%
Belleville, IL CBOC	0.0%
Hope Recovery Center	0.2%
Primary Care Team 1 Annex (4974 Manchester Avenue)	4.4%
Primary Care Team 2 Annex (2727 Washington Avenue)	3.2%
St. Louis Vet Center	1.5%
Other	9.6%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the St. Louis VA Medical Center. Four hundred six (406) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	22.2%	Emergency Room	6.2%	Extended Care	1.2%
Outpatient Clinic	16.7%	Mental Health Services	12.3%	Dental	2.7%
Pharmacy	8.6%	X-Ray	4.4%	Laboratory	10.6%
Travel/Enrollment	1.2%	Main Lobby	3.7%	Specialist Visit	14.0%
Inpatient Care	3.9%	Women's Clinic	0.7%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	1.5%
Prosthetics	2.0%	Podiatry	3.2%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	0.7%
Claim & Pension Exam	11.6%	Other	29.3% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, etc.)		

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R7) are marked “current,” and results from previous surveys (R1 – R6) are also included. Beginning with Summary Report (R5), survey questions and rating scales appear differently from previous reports. In previous versions of the survey, veterans were posed questions with binary response options: “Yes” or “No.” Since 2015, survey questions and response options have been rewritten to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Survey questions now appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at a VA facility has increased for this round of surveys; however, concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				71.6%	64.2%	88.9%	74.4%
No:				28.4%	35.8%	11.1%	25.6%
Strongly Agree:	49.8%	44.7%	37.7%				
Mostly Agree:	22.2%	23.8%	22.2%				
Neutral:	14.8%	10.9%	16.7%				
Mostly Disagree:	6.2%	8.9%	7.9%				
Strongly Disagree:	7.1%	11.7%	15.5%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 292 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Over the last three Summary Reports, veterans have reported ever increasing satisfaction with the ease of scheduling their appointments. This may suggest that the new national VA scheduling software system is working to help veterans schedule their appointments more easily than before the scheduling system upgrade. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments continued to state most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“When in the office and making an appointment in person, it is very easy; but when calling to schedule an appointment for the Women's Clinic, it is VERY difficult, as well as scheduling anything elsewhere. The system has very confusing phone trees, and no direct lines.”*

- *“I had to leave 2 messages, but was not called back. I then called a 3rd time & spoke with the RN over Mental Health. I wanted to self-schedule, but she was not aware I could do that. She put me on hold & went to ask someone; when she came back she scheduled my appt.”*
- *“Getting someone to answer the phone and take responsibility for scheduling an appointment is difficult; regularly takes several calls, then the appointment dates are more than a month out; no way to be seen in a timely fashion.”*

Recommendation: Continue to monitor the scheduling process at the VA to insure that veterans are able to have multiple ways to schedule appointments, including the use of the national VA scheduling system to in-person scheduling onsite. Also, ensure that veterans have quick, efficient access to a live person for scheduling concerns.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VA St. Louis Health Care System has concentrated further on improving access and implementing scheduling practices. In the first quarter of FY2017, Primary Care and Mental Health adjusted their schedules and workflow to enable veterans to obtain Same Day access for care. In Primary Care, veterans may be offered a face-to-face visit or a telephone call from a Primary Care provider dependent upon the nature of the Veteran’s concern. In Mental Health, a face to face visit or a telephone call may be offered; however, all calls will be screened to ensure that if necessary the Suicide Hot Line team can be engaged.

VASLTHCS implemented a multidiscipline Veteran Call Center which allows patients to call during the normal business day to make, schedule, or change an appointment for most clinics. In addition, Veterans can request their current medications to be refilled or they can be referred to receive a new refill of their medication. The staff works together to ensure callers receive the best possible telephone and appointment access service. The Call Center's top priority is to provide "First Call Resolution" to our callers.

2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

More veterans continued to report that they were able to easily navigate the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region in order to find the location of their appointments.

I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				88.4%	84.9%	92.1%	90.5%
No:				11.7%	15.1%	7.9%	9.5%
Strongly Agree:	62.8%	60.9%	53.2%				
Mostly Agree:	21.4%	19.8%	20.4%				

Neutral:	10.1%	9.7%	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	2.7%	3.2%	4.4%				
Strongly Disagree:	3.0%	6.4%	9.6%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 342 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Over the last three surveys, veterans continue to report improvement with their ability to navigate the VA facilities. This is a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to address issues quickly when they occur while renovations continue at John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks.

Although the vast majority of veterans were able to reach their appointment site easily, the veterans who had difficulty finding their appointments indicated that their navigation was adversely impacted by the facility renovations underway; but when veterans asked VA personnel for directions, staff was very helpful and polite.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Poor signage, rooms not labeled.”*
- *“It was one of my first visits, so I did not know where I needed to go; but any one that I stopped was very helpful.”*
- *“You have to use the facility to know your way around...but folks will help you. You won't be coddled at the VA, but the men who use this facility aren't used to being coddled in the first place! So, I guess it would not be for everyone who wants a luxury experience. I, for one, am great-full for the care I have been given.”*

Recommendation: Continue to monitor interior and exterior signage to make sure they reflect current changes due to construction. Continue to support and encourage staff to show excellent customer service to veterans who need help getting to their appointments.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VASTLHCS continues to have and update online directories for both the Jefferson Barracks (JB) and John Cochran (JC) campuses. Additionally, VASTLHCS performs quarterly reviews of the existing comprehensive directories located at the main entry points. These directories along with interior wayfinding signage guide our Veterans to the appropriate point of care. The facility will, as part of the annual initiative to better wayfinding, award a contract during summer 2017 to update the necessary signage.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Over the last three survey reports, veterans reported ever increasing satisfaction with the cleanliness of the VA facilities.

At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:				36.7%	30.2%	48.4%	26.0%
Above Average:				26.4%	26.4%	29.7%	25.4%
Average/ Fair:				24.4%	37.7%	15.4%	24.2%
Below Average:				4.8%	0.0%	2.2%	14.2%
Poor:				7.7%	5.7%	4.4%	10.1%
Strongly Agree:	53.4%	52.8%	35.5%				
Mostly Agree:	26.1%	23.0%	31.7%				
Neutral:	12.3%	14.1%	15.8%				
Mostly Disagree:	4.7%	3.6%	10.3%				
Strongly Disagree:	3.4%	6.4%	16.7%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 323 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean. Thirty-three (33) veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean. For those veterans who reported concerns with cleanliness, their comments focused on the condition of the restrooms and the ongoing renovations at the John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks campuses.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Building is old and dark. Light was not working in bathroom. Much renovation going on.”*
- *“Some parts very clean. Restrooms always busy and hard to find except on main floor.”*
- *“I can't give you specifics, but it felt dirty, old and rundown. I have been seen at least yearly by doctors from St. John's Mercy Medical group and the comparison of their waiting rooms, patient care rooms, etc., is significantly brighter and more updated than the VA.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff maintain their frequent monitoring of high-traffic areas, such as restrooms and lobby entrances, and are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanness or obstructions to an area. Additionally, continue to encourage the good work the Environmental Management Service staff is doing. They have a challenging task due to the age and renovations being made at VA facilities.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Environmental Management Service (EMS) is now fully staffed, and leaders proactively round all areas for housekeeping quality assurance. Through VASTLHCS Veteran hiring fairs, excellent

applicants were identified and promptly hired. Additionally, FY2017 funding allowed EMS to replace end-of-life housekeeping equipment which has allowed better outcomes with less labor. EMS staff members are publicly recognized during the monthly staff meetings for their individual and team contributions to the organization.

4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

Over the last three reports, wait times have steadily improved. The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time declined, while the percentage of veterans expressing that they were seen in a reasonable amount of time increased.

From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
No:				28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
Strongly Agree:	48.8%	45.2%	35.5%				
Mostly Agree:	20.0%	20.2%	21.7%				
Neutral:	16.5%	11.3%	15.8%				
Mostly Disagree:	6.2%	9.7%	10.3%				
Strongly Disagree:	8.6%	13.7%	16.7%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 279 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary for certain departments. Also, in a few departments, veterans reported delays which might be the result of personnel shortages in certain departments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I am very pleased with the overall service; I put it on par with private provider's.”*
- *“Rapid turnover of medical personnel may cause vet to see new doctor by the time he gets appointment and actually gets in to see doctor.”*
- *“Appointment scheduling has been an issue with the VA over the 10 years they have been my medical provider. It is not uncommon to experience more than a 30 day wait for an appointment. However, when an appointment is scheduled the wait time is never an issue. My experience has been that the providers at the VA are extremely punctual. Considering 10 years of appointments with the various departments of the VA, I have rarely had to wait more than 10 minutes.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients' scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from point of contact.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VASTLHCS has worked hard to improve access to care for our Veterans by increasing staff levels in key areas through targeted hiring fairs. As a result of several initiatives, VASTLHCS is in the top 25% of all VAs for getting Veterans access to care within proscribed timeframes.

In addition, we have fully implemented a call center which is staffed with schedulers that can create appointments for the majority of Veterans' needs. The average call pick up time for scheduling in March was 14 seconds.

5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While some veterans are still having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the last three Summary Reports show consistent improvement year-over-year as a larger percentage of veterans reported positive communication exchanges. However, there is still room for improvement.

VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
No:				28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
Strongly Agree:	53.2%	50.8%	42.1%				
Mostly Agree:	21.9%	16.5%	18.2%				
Neutral:	10.8%	11.3%	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	5.9%	8.5%	12.8%				
Strongly Disagree:	8.1%	12.9%	14.5%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 305 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I would've liked to know more what to expect after surgery. Not just how much I can/cannot lift. I have a friend getting ready to have a surgery outside VA and they had a class to go to on what to expect after surgery. I'm between week 3-4 and feel decent but don't want to do anything to mess up repair either. You don't always know what questions to ask prior to (which I'm sure they would answer) about what to expect week to week."*

- *“At every step of the process, they told me what to expect and approx. how long it would take.”*
- *“Doctors quickly diagnosed my ailment and were able to verbally explain the entire process that would take place throughout the various departments.”*

Recommendation: Continue to stress the importance of communication between medical staff and patients; urging staff to listen to patient concerns and provide complete answers to their questions regarding care.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Initiatives specific to improving communication between VA staff and Veterans have been incorporated to many of the training programs. When staff is trained on I CARE principles, good communication is stressed as fundamental. Additionally, VA101 training is being provided to all staff to help improve the Veterans’ experience in our facility. In the cases that we receive patient feedback on negative staff interactions, targeted training is delivered to those individuals to address areas of deficiency.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. Accordingly, the data suggests that a majority of veterans were pleased with the VA’s healthcare efficiency.

I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	54.7%	52.0%	39.9%				
Mostly Agree:	16.3%	12.5%	16.0%				
Neutral:	10.3%	12.1%	16.0%				
Mostly Disagree:	4.9%	7.7%	7.6%				
Strongly Disagree:	13.8%	15.7%	20.4%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 288 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Most of the concerns expressed by veterans related to the approval process to see the correct doctor or department. Many veterans stated that they had to be seen by multiple departments before getting to see the department that they needed to be seen by.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Basic services (lab work, blood work, etc.) involve too many levels of approval and take too long to schedule and conduct, and get results.”*
- *“I really appreciate that the doctor allowed me to ask questions and get comfortable with the procedure before proceeding.”*

- *“Due to the nature of the ailment, all care/treatment could not be administered at the time of the appointment/s; however at each department, treatment or lab work was administered.”*

Recommendation: Realizing that illnesses/aliments are complex and may overlap with a number of different departments in order to treat, try to identify referral patterns for departments and then see if there are any synergies between departments to streamline the referral chain in order to make the process smoother and quicker for veterans needing care.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VA St. Louis continues to build upon the success of our PACT Team model which is the VA’s version of a patient centered medical home. Each team consists of a primary care provider, nurse care manager, clinical associate and administrative clerk. In addition, a pharmacist, social worker and a psychologist are additional team members who are available for consultation. VA St. Louis has a total of 45 PACT Teams. These teams are distributed by workload at both campuses, each annex and also at our Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs).

7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown at St. Louis VA facilities has greatly increased over the last three survey periods. Over seventy-eight (78.6%) percent of the responses received reported respectful interactions between veterans and staff at St. Louis VA facilities.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				73.0%	67.9%	88.8%	70.7%
No:				27.0%	32.1%	11.2%	29.3%
Strongly Agree:	61.6%	58.1%	46.6%				
Mostly Agree:	17.0%	16.9%	20.7%				
Neutral:	9.6%	10.9%	13.5%				
Mostly Disagree:	4.4%	4.4 %	7.1%				
Strongly Disagree:	7.4%	9.7%	12.1%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 319 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. The data suggests that current VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training are working as intended. However, veterans still report that personnel in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The majority of the staff is very respectful and willing to assist. In every large group, you always will find individuals that are the exception.”*

- *“Some of the Dr's really need to remember that EVERY patient's time is valuable just like theirs is. If they are that busy, then maybe the actual patient load needs to be addressed.”*
- *“Once in a while you will encounter the "career government employee", the one that is kind of just going with the flow, there to get a paycheck, and is somewhat jaded with the system and with their clients/customers.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to educate all VA staff on the importance of “*I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics*.” Those employees who best display *I CARE* values deserve to be properly recognized, and those employees identified as lacking should receive additional guidance.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

In 2016, we expanded New Employee orientation to include a session on Military Culture. This provides non-veteran and Veteran staff with an understanding of the military experiences, the various branches and culture. This is taught by a group of Veteran staff and some volunteer Veterans. Likewise, the Whole Health Initiative was intensified to place focus on the whole person via personalized, proactive and patient-driven experiences. The facility was selected to receive funding from the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation to expand our efforts.

All VASTLHCS employees continue to receive ‘I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics’ training and recommit annually. The principles of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence are emphasized during the training. In the cases that we receive patient feedback on poor customer service, the appropriate training or action is taken to correct the issue. Additionally, VA101 which provides staff with information on all aspects of the VA is taught by peer staff members. Over 50% of VSTLHCS staff have completed this training in the 1st year. The remaining staff will complete the course during calendar year 2017.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

Over the last three surveys, year-to-year data continues to suggest that veterans are more inclined to positively recommend St. Louis region VA facilities to other veterans than previous survey periods. Willingness to recommend St. Louis VA facilities has grown steadily from 57.3% (R5) to 66.5% (R6) to 69.9% (R7).

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				69.8%	50.0%	81.5%	58.2%
No:				30.2%	50.0%	18.5%	41.8%
Strongly Agree:	50.7%	44.3%	36.9%				
Mostly Agree:	19.2%	22.2%	20.4%				

Neutral:	13.3%	11.7%	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	5.2%	4.0 %	9.6%				
Strongly Disagree:	11.6%	17.7%	20.7%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this statement with 284 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would positively recommend the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“During my visit to the VAMC John Cochran Division, I was treated with nothing but the utmost respect, dignity and consideration.”*
- *“I have found the VA has continually made efforts to improve their services and find it compares favorably with the outside medical services I utilize.”*
- *“Outstanding with the exception of the red tape hassles.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“Answers and solutions are not given freely nor in a timely manner. It’s a ‘try this and wait and see for a year or two, then try this and wait’.... or they just leave you hanging and never get back to you.”*
- *“No matter how good the care is at the VA, the facilities are very sparse and attitudes of care givers are generally not as user-friendly as non-va health facilities.”*
- *“Facilities can be tight at times if you are admitted. 3 to a room is tight. I have had a few poor overnight experiences.”*

Recommendation: Continue to stress patient-focused care from the time the veteran arrives to the time he/she leaves to the St. Louis VA Healthcare employees.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VASTLHCS is committed to delivering the highest quality of care, with the best customer service, to our Veterans. We will continue to work on improving our Veteran satisfaction and experiences. Additionally, we continue to strengthen our relationship with local academic affiliates to also facilitate Veterans’ care in the community.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

A veteran’s confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. Over the last three reports, veterans’ satisfaction with their physician or nurse

has increased. The data suggests that medical staff is making positive strides toward improving veterans' health care experiences.

How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	48.8%	52.8%	39.7%				
Above Average (Good):	20.7%	13.7%	25.6%				
Average/Fair:	15.5%	14.5%	15.8%				
Below Average:	6.2%	6.8 %	8.6%				
Poor:	8.9%	12.1%	10.3%				

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this question with 282 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and high quality care. Conversely, veterans who expressed dissatisfaction with their personal doctor/nurse had several different reasons for their responses, including: poor follow-up, communication, and longer-than-expected wait times.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My care during this visit was world class medical care.”*
- *“In general, it is hard to get specific results from your tests such as cholesterol levels triglycerides; and when you ask for information from orthopedic, they tell you to put in a request from records. It is information about me, and it is treated like I am asking for too much and they don't want to take the time to explain medical terms, maybe they don't even know the exact definition. They just want to tell me not to worry which is a very simplistic answer to a veteran or any patient.”*
- *“I saw a ‘new’ doctor. She was very nice and professional. My blood test was abnormal, and she communicated what was wrong quite well. I have had five or more doctors in the fifteen or so years I have been going to VA.”*

Recommendation: Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VASTLHCS recognizes staff members who show ICARE values through several mechanisms. As we receive compliments from Veterans, family members, or other stakeholders, the named staff are recognized at the Facility Morning Report and given an ICARE certificate in a public forum. The Medical Center Director personally acknowledges the employee during the meeting. Appropriate staff are also recognized through a weekly Civility Star program, whereby staff can

nominate other staff members whom they believe display the ICARE values. On average, 5-10 staff are recognized with Civility Star each week.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

Satisfaction with veterans' overall experience at St. Louis VA facilities has seen dramatic improvement through the survey cycles. The VA Medical Center's continued focus on respect and communication through the "I-CARE" Program appears to be improving veterans' overall experiences.

How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R7 (current)	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	37.4%	31.5%	22.7%	26.2%	24.5%	39.7%	29.1%
Above Average (Good):	26.1%	24.2%	28.6%	26.2%	20.8%	32.1%	13.9%
Average/Fair:	17.7%	19.8%	21.9%	22.9%	15.2%	11.5%	23.4%
Below Average:	6.9%	11.3%	12.6%	11.6%	20.8%	7.7%	17.1%
Poor:	11.8%	13.3%	14.3%	13.1%	18.9%	9.0%	16.5%

Four hundred six (406) responses were received to this question with 258 indicating "Excellent" or "Above Average" overall experiences at St. Louis VA facilities; seventy-six (76) reported "Below Average" or "Poor" overall experience.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I personally have had great service when I've visited Jefferson Barracks. I often joke with my veteran friends that they should move here to St. Louis just so they can get better treatment and service compared to their local VA Med facility."*
- *"Very good overall. While every "family" and "organization" has certain members that do not always live up to expectations, the overwhelming majority of the staff are thoughtful and professional. I am truly thankful for their efforts on behalf of my health care needs."*
- *"While I am VERY THANKFUL for the VA, I feel that they are overburdened and have little time to deal w/my personal issues. I have a bad hip and don't know why or what options I might have. I pay for Medicare because I don't trust that if a real problem shows up that the VA will be able to give me enough options or time."*
- *"I use the VA on a limited basis for my service connected treatments. Over the years, it has become more like a doctor's office outside of government."*
- *"I have had years of care at the Kansas City VA Medical Center, and now at John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. The care I have gotten has been great and clearly communicated. My family members are included when needed. My well-being overall has been considered."*

Recommendation: Continue to build on improvements with patient experience by implementing recommendations found in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP), VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP), town halls, Veteran Advisory Councils, the newly developed MyVA Community Council, kiosk checkout questionnaires, and real-time responses to ensure that stakeholder feedback and veterans' concerns are at the forefront of all efforts by the St. Louis VA Healthcare System.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VASTLHCS values our relationships with Veterans and our community. We have increased the use of Veteran Town Halls to share information and hear directly from our Veteran population. During the past year, five Town Halls were conducted in different locations to encourage Veteran participation: Edwardsville, IL; Ferguson, MO; Overland, MO; St. Peters, MO and Troy, MO were the sites. Additionally, the MyVA Community Advisory Board meets regularly. This initiative brings a diverse group of stakeholders together to improve the Veterans' experiences while accessing care.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Summary Report discloses various issues ranging from the customer service received by veterans to the constant renovations being made at different VA facilities as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"My primary recommendations are to address the personnel shortages (hire more nurses), and push EMS staff on cleanliness standards, especially with regard to the restrooms."*
- *"Look at staffing. Many areas seem to be understaffed. Keep increasing the amount of time in listening to the patient and explaining procedures to them."*
- *"I'm satisfied. I could use hospitals outside VA with my medical insurance but choose VA. Maybe a lil cleaner bathrooms, but I understand that even with as much use as they get."*
- *"I LIKE THE IDEA OF THE CLINICS. I NOTICE THERE'S ONE IN FLORISSANT. WONDER IF IT WOULD BE FEASIBLE TO USE THEM AS "URGENT CARE" STATIONS FOR CERTAIN LEVELS OF HEALTH CARE NEEDS. THAT MIGHT RELIEVE THE EMERGENCY ROOMS. PERHAPS THAT'S WHAT THEY ARE ALREADY DOING."*
- *"The audiology department could use technicians that are more up to date with the products they use. My recommendation would be to rotate the technicians that adjust the hearing aids and add an audiologist or two. It takes a long time to get an appointment, even if your service connected. When you get the hearing aids the technicians that adjust them are not up to speed with new features and new technology that's built into the hearing aids."*
- *"There has been a lot of new construction at the Jefferson Barracks facility, but it is my understanding is that a lot of the building is not going to be used as medical facilities. The problem most places you visit these days is finding adequate parking close to the building you need."*
- *"Elevator needs to be updated. Only one or two in service at JC on Grand. Have to stand a long time waiting for service."*

- *“Improve the parking, most days you have to arrive 30-45 minutes early because valets are over run.”*
- *“The VA should cover the cost of the medical transport. The Vet is instructed by the staff to call 911. The VA does not have the facilities to provide medical transport in house.”*
- *“Either start putting some serious money toward VA health care or privatize it, also get some real Mental health professionals. It was suggested I get treatment for PTSD, but I have no faith in them.”*
- *“The St. Louis John Cochran VA is a bit worn down, labyrinth-like, and confusing. But the service is always excellent.”*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Which provider or department that does an excellent job do you want Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in the St. Louis region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Two hundred ten (211) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region.

Below are sample responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"The mammogram department do an excellent job!"*
- *"Dr. F., Cardiologist. Is an excellent physician."*
- *"Physical Therapy gives me different exercises that help my general feeling of good health!"*
- *"Mental Health West - Dr. L is a tremendous asset to the Veterans he serves. He's exactly the professional that other VA physicians should strive to emulate."*
- *"Dr. C is hands down the best Doctor in Missouri."*
- *"The optical department is sensational. They need to be applauded."*
- *"The Senior department. I realize that there aren't that many of us still living, but my care was excellent. When I moved to St Louis, my VA social worker suggested that I might get more timely care through the senior group."*
- *"THE WOMEN'S CLINIC!"*
- *"Vision, dental, current primary care. I use the VA by choice, I'm happy with all my care providers. If I don't like them, I change them. It is my right."*

- *“I believe Dr. M is doing her best and utmost to keep me healthy, and she listens to me when I tell her what is bothering me. She is kind and caring.”*
- *“Dr. M is fantastic. He has always returned my calls and addressed my concerns in a professional manner.”*
- *“Dr. L took time to discuss my condition and explained certain elements of my condition. He was pleasant, efficient in his examination and treatment. He is also light hearted to talk to. He was helpful in guiding me to the scheduling secretary and checked my forms to see if they were in order.”*
- *“PG has been a great provider for my health care needs, she is a very good listener and shows great empathy.”*
- *“Great care. My primary care physician Dr. JM and mental health physician Dr. L are the Best. They are always available to see me even when I am not scheduled for an appointment. I thank these two. They saved my life!”*
- *“D, the attending nurse in the GI Lab explained everything to me as well as asked me many health questions to get a better picture of my condition before my exam test. She also informed the doctor of my condition, problems and history of my conditions during the test. She had a great smile and show of concern.”*

Recommendation: The men and women of the St. Louis VA Healthcare System provide superior levels of care for our nation’s veterans. Their dedication, compassion, and professionalism deserve our praise and respect; efforts should continue to recognize those who best represent the St. Louis VA Healthcare System.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VASTLHCS recognizes staff through several mechanisms. Our VA Cardiac Surgery Program, led by Dr. Spencer Melby, (combined VA and Washington University appointment) has completed 100 cases with excellent clinical outcomes. This success could not have been achieved without close support of the OR Nursing, ICU Nursing, the Surgical Service, the Medicine Service, Cardiology and Anesthesia.

Our Primary Care Service is led by Dr. Anu Agarwal who has nearly three decades of VA experience as a physician. She has reinvigorated our Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT) to achieve better productivity and access for Veterans throughout the region.

Dr. David Vollman is an ophthalmologist who has made significant contributions to improve the quality of ophthalmic surgery in the Veterans Health Administration. Dr. Vollman and colleagues developed the Ophthalmic Surgical Outcome Database Pilot project. The effort enables cataract surgeons to track their outcomes using relevant clinical metrics. For this effort, Dr. Vollman was

named as a 2013 finalist for the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal and was honored in 2016 as one of 40 Leaders under 40 in the St Louis metropolitan area. They serve as examples of the dedicated staff who serve Veterans at VASTLHCS.



FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

In the sixth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The VASTLHCS has directories for both the Jefferson Barracks (JB) and John Cochran (JC) campuses available online. Additionally, we have comprehensive directories located at the main entry points with wayfinding signage to guide our Veterans to the appropriate point of care. An initiative has been started to correct and keep the interior signage accurate."* in response to veterans' concerns about being able to find the location of their appointments. How often does the St. Louis VA Medical Center update their comprehensive directories online, and what is the status of the initiative to correct and keep interior signage accurate?

VA Medical Center's Response:

VASTLHCS continues to have updated online directories for both the Jefferson Barracks (JB) and John Cochran (JC) campuses. The VASTLHCS Facilities Engineering Service reviews the online directories once a quarter to define gaps. We are committed to continually improving and updating our wayfinding as construction and renovations are completed. We use volunteers to be a personal contact to help Veterans navigate the buildings.

Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

In the sixth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center highlighted a number of hiring initiatives that provided a steady stream of new hires and stated, *"The VASTLHCS has worked hard to improve access to care for our Veterans. As a result of several initiatives, the VASTLHCS is in the top 25% of all VAs for getting Veterans access to care within proscribed timeframes."* What is the current rating for the St. Louis VA in access to care within proscribed timeframes?

VA Medical Center's Response:

VASTLHCS is in the top 25% of all VAs for getting Veterans access to care within proscribed timeframes.

Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

In the sixth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"In order to assure that all staff has an understanding of the I CARE principles, the training is given to all new employees, upon their starting their jobs, as well as annually staff recommit to the principles. Veteran feedback is welcomed and is sought out through town halls, Veteran Advisory Councils, the newly developed MyVA Community Council, Kiosk checkout questionnaires, and real-time responses."* What type of actions or improvements has the St. Louis VA implemented because of feedback received from these initiatives?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Veterans have told us that they are frustrated by our telephone system and not reaching a "live" person. In December 2016, we implemented an integrated call center that provides scheduling & appointment services, pharmacy and nurse triage. The call center is able to meet and/or coordinate their needs for services. Type of calls and requests from Veterans are tracked and used to improve our system. An example, we identified that some veterans were canceling appointments because of transportation issues. We created a reference for the staff to use to resolve a transportation issue rather than cancel and reschedule an appointment. Additionally, if a Veteran is referred to VA Emergency or other Emergency, the nurse calls and provides a report on the Veteran and the issue he/she is being referred for.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the sixth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The VASTLHCS is committed to delivering the highest quality of care, with the best customer service, to our Veterans. We will continue to work on improving our Veteran satisfaction and experiences. Additionally, we continue to strengthen our relationship with local academic affiliates to also facilitate Veterans' care in the community."* What type of relationship does the St. Louis VA Health Care System have with local academic affiliates, and how have they been strengthened over the year to provide better care for our veterans?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Medical student and resident physician training is a core mission of VHA. VA St. Louis is fortunate to have strong training program affiliations with both local medical schools (St. Louis University and Washington University); several nursing schools (Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, UMSL School of Nursing, St. Louis University School of Nursing), UMSL School of Optometry and the St. Louis College of Pharmacy. In addition to these trainees, VA St. Louis shares faculty members with these affiliated partners in the following disciplines: Medicine, Surgery, Psychiatry, Psychology, and Optometry. There are full time and part time faculty members who have been awarded prestigious research grants from the VA and/or NIH. These awards and the breadth of

collaboration have grown exponentially under the leadership of our Associate Chief of Research and Education, Dr. Ziyad Al-Aly.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the St. Louis region is making progress with regard to customer service at the St. Louis VA Medical Center. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' customer service experiences at the St. Louis region VA facilities.

Over the last three reporting cycles, the St. Louis VA has demonstrated steady improvement in several categories, including: scheduling, communication, wait times, and culture of respect. Therefore, veterans in the St. Louis region can be confident that their local VA is taking their concerns seriously and is implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. For instance, the St. Louis VA's new call center was established to address veterans' scheduling concerns in a timely, efficient manner over the phone. Thus far, I am encouraged by the VA's success in assisting veterans this way, and I look forward to tracking the program's ongoing performance. Overall, I am pleased with the St. Louis VA's efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service by listening to their feedback, and I will continue fighting to ensure that progress continues toward increasingly positive results.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

Special thanks to the members of various veterans' service organizations who assisted in the development and completion of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program: George Newell, Lowry Finley-Jackson, and Betty Gonzales.